

# VANGUARD

Fall 2020

## 100th Anniversary of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier

**TEDx**Veterans Affairs

*Now more than ever*

---

**Streamlining Disability Claims**

*'Smart Tool' aids processing*

---

**Women Veterans**

*Recognizing their contributions*

**VA**



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs



VA makes over  
**30,000**  
**HOUSE CALLS** EACH DAY.



See what VA can do for you:  
**choose.va.gov**

VA is leading the way in telehealth innovation to ensure Veterans can access health care when and where they need it, including from the comfort of their own homes using a smart phone or personal computer. Through VA telehealth technologies, the department's 30,000 average daily telehealth appointments bring new levels of convenience to America's Veterans and new meaning to the term "house calls."



**Choose VA**  
Your benefits. Our mission.



## FEATURES



**10**

### TEDx Veterans Affairs

TEDx is an avenue for VA to tell its own story to employees and to share all the great things we're doing.



**26**

### A Most Sacred Mission

VA provides several burial options and memorial benefits to ensure every eligible Veteran and family member receives a burial of dignity, honor and respect.



**28**

### A New Chapter in VA History

A year after establishing the History Office, VA found someone willing to take on a position that spans more than 100 years and is making historical moves right now.



**16**

### Streamlining Disability Claims

To help make the processing of disability claims more efficient, VBA partnered with VA OIT to develop a tool that quickly classifies disability compensation claims.

## FEATURES



### 34

#### 100th Anniversary of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier

Congress passed the joint resolution which called for the body of an unknown American soldier to be brought for burial in the National Cemetery at Arlington, Va.



### 22

#### Top Honors for Leaders of Two Health Care Programs

Top honors went to leaders of two VA programs who were named winners of the 2020 Samuel J. Heyman Service to America Medals (Sammies).



### 20

#### Recognizing the Contributions of Women Veterans

Women Veterans have served since the Revolutionary War. Most people don't realize there are 2 million women Veterans today.

## DEPARTMENTS

5 > **From the Secretary**

6 > **Around VA**

13 > **Best of the Blog**

15 > **Making a Difference**

25 > **Volunteer Spotlight**

33 > **Career Corner**

38 > **Employee Resources**

### Vanguard | VA's Employee Magazine

Fall 2020 | Volume 61, Issue 3

Published by the Office of Public Affairs (801)

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

810 Vermont Ave., N.W. Washington, D.C. 20420

[vanguard@va.gov](mailto:vanguard@va.gov)

Available online at <https://vawww.insider.va.gov>

Editor: Lisa Gaegler  
Staff Writers: Ann Richardson  
Adrian Wilairat  
Jennifer Sardam  
Art Director: Jeff Pace

#### On the Cover

Member of the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment "The Old Guard" walks guard duty at the shrine of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Photo by Craig M. Fildes/flickr.com

# From the Secretary

By Robert Wilkie



**T**his Veterans Day, and throughout

National Veterans and Military Families Month, every one of our nearly 400,000 employees should be proud of the service they deliver to our heroes.

It's no exaggeration to say VA has revolutionized the way

we care for those who risked everything to defend this nation.

It's a standard of care that answers President Lincoln's call in his Second Inaugural Address, when he said:

"With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations."

VA care also captures the hope that Gen. Omar Bradley expressed when he returned from World War II to care for millions of returning Veterans. Bradley thought the world of the men and women who fought, and wanted them to return to full lives in America:

"They will be assets to the community, a stabilizing influence in the country. They have much to give."

Today, thanks to your hard work, VA is living up to these visions.

Your successful implementation of the MISSION Act allowed VA to refer more than 2.6 million Veterans to community care and authorize more than 430,000 urgent care visits. This was the promise of health care choice that we finally delivered.

But we didn't degrade VA along the way. Instead,

**It's no exaggeration  
to say VA has  
revolutionized the  
way we care for those  
who risked everything  
to defend this nation.**

we built a bottom-up organization that gives everyone a stake in our performance, which has led to positive change throughout the department.

Wait times for new patients dropped over the last six years for primary care, specialty care and mental health, and VA compares favorably to the private sector for access and quality of care.

We've undertaken a wave of reform and modernization that will let us serve Veterans more efficiently, including our new electronic health record system that launched in Spokane, Wash.

At the same time, VA never forgot it is a leader in the field of medical innovation. The VA that gave us the first cardiac pacemaker and performed the first liver transplant is still shaping the future with precision oncology, 3D medical printing, and telehealth.

The new and improved VA was more than ready to help Veterans when COVID-19 struck. We controlled the virus in our medical facilities and our Community Living Centers and found creative ways to keep serving Veterans during this time of social distancing, including drive-up prescription and testing facilities.

Our devotion to the cause put us in a strong position to carry out our Fourth Mission of supporting the nation's health care system in a time of crisis. Forty-nine states have turned to VA for help, and more than

3,100 VA employees deployed across the country to assist patients.

Your performance has yielded another important dividend—increasing Veterans' trust in their VA. That trust will be critical as this department presses ahead in the coming years to end Veteran suicide.

It's a daunting challenge—to solve a crisis that has been with us since the Civil War—but we are already laying the groundwork to ensure Veterans get the care and attention they need, either inside VA or in the community.

Because of your dedication, I am more confident than ever before when I say VA will never forsake our heroes and will keep working to bring them all the way home. ♦



# Around VA



## Veteran Offers Feedback to Researchers on Makeup of Studies

By Mike Richman

Sean McGrane knows the different stages of the VA research process—he's lived it. McGrane participated in two studies aimed at better understanding the impact of traumatic brain injury (TBI). He experienced a TBI in a 2005 roadside bombing in Iraq.

The Army Veteran is also a member of the Veteran engagement group (VEG) for the Denver VA COIN (Center of Innovation for Veteran-Centered and Value-Driven Care) and the Rocky Mountain MIRECC (Mental Illness Research, Education, and Clinical Center) for Suicide Prevention.

VEGs consist of Veterans who review and offer feedback on projects or proposals designed to improve the research from a Veteran perspective. That valuable perspective shapes VA research studies and has gained momentum in recent years.

"To be on the advisory side of the table is really rewarding," McGrane said. "That's because it's easy as a Vet to get really frustrated that things aren't happening faster and to not feel like yourself and to just want somebody to fix you and make things better.

"So, it's been eye-opening for me to be on the other side, to see these research projects that are in the funnel. That gives you hope and makes you feel more positive again."

He takes part in monthly board meetings. At each



Sean McGrane (center right) is a Veteran advisor for VA research in Denver.

one, a different researcher presents a study proposal to his 10-member VEG.

In those meetings, McGrane has occasionally observed a knowledge gap between the researchers and the Veteran community they are trying to serve. To him, it's "super-important on multiple levels" for Veterans to give feedback to the researchers.

"We can really help steer the research in a productive way that can save a lot of money and help make the study more effective," he said. "We're the voice of the Veteran to make sure they've considered things before they engage Veterans." ♦

*Richman is a writer and editor with VA Research Communications.*

# Scheduling Patient Appointments Now Easier With New Software

By OEHRM Communications

**V**eterans and employees now have a new tool to book appointments online.

Launched in late August at VA Central Ohio Healthcare System, the Centralized Scheduling Solution (CSS) helps Veterans book and manage their appointments online. The new solution also adds an extra layer of patient safety, enabling staff to identify Veterans at risk for missing critical health care visits.

The solution launch ended on Sept. 2 with an average of 876 Veteran appointments checked in or out daily for the first two weeks the system was online. By the close of the launch, 151 Veterans created accounts to use the new My VA Health patient portal, which they can now use to book their medical appointments.

With VA's previous system,

schedulers would log in to multiple software applications to coordinate timing, equipment and personnel. CSS uses straightforward, color-coded time slots and what Office of Electronic Health Record Modernization Chief Medical Officer Dr. Laura Kroupa explained is a "resource-based" approach to scheduling.

"It really brings together the provider, the patient, the nurse, the room—all the resources that are needed to take care of a Veteran—into one place, so that they can all be scheduled at one time," Kroupa said.

Vivian Hutson, director of the VA Central Ohio Healthcare System, said she was eager for her facilities to receive the new tool.

"It felt like I was at NASA waiting for a launch," said Hutson, about the



VISN 10 Director RimaAnn Nelson, Acting VA Deputy Secretary Pamela Powers, and OEHRM Executive Director John Windom (left to right) arrive for the go-live activities.

CSS go-live event. "The amount of optimism was off the charts because we were fueled by one mission: how we can serve the Veterans."

The CSS launch marks a major milestone in VA's broader Electronic Health Record Modernization (EHRM) effort. Initial EHR rollout at VA sites starts this fall.

For more information on CSS and VA's EHRM program, visit <https://vawww.insider.va.gov/ehrm>. ♦

## Youth Volunteer Steps Up During Pandemic

By Sarah Gudgeon

**A**mid a global pandemic, Brooke Jackowski, a youth volunteer at the Erie VA Medical Center in Pennsylvania, wanted to do her part to help local Veterans. That led her to the front lines of the medical center, where she began serving as a screener to safeguard the health of those entering the facility.

"By helping Veterans, I also feel like I am helping my own family in some way," said Jackowski, the daughter and granddaughter of Air Force Veterans. "I feel like I can do the most good being the first person the patient sees."

Jackowski, a high school senior, began volunteering at the Erie VA Medical Center in 2017. She has since dedicated 235 hours of volunteer service. She has served in various assignments, including working with the facility's interior designer to help renovate the Patriot Café.

Jackowski also performs clerical duties in the executive suite, conducts patient escort duties, and now volunteers her time twice a week to screen Veterans, staff, volunteers and visitors for COVID-19 at the facility's main entrance.

Having both a father and grandfather who were in the military gave her an appreciation for life and sacrifice.

"From my father, I learned two things," said Jackowski. "Flexibility in life is something you must embrace. And



Brooke Jackowski stationed at the Erie VA Medical Center's main entrance.

war affects people—both those who leave and those who stay behind—in different ways. My grandfather taught me that patience is always needed. If something doesn't work right, either try again or find another way to do it."

These experiences have helped shape her into an advocate who works to better the community and all those she encounters.

Jackowski was recently recognized by Disabled American Veterans as a recipient of a \$7,500 Jesse Brown Memorial Youth Scholarship for her commitment to making a difference in the lives of Veterans. ♦

*Gudgeon is the public affairs officer at the Erie VA Medical Center.*



## Podcast Opens New Communications Channel for Employees

By Michael Cole

**F**inding ways to communicate effectively with more than 800 employees, spread out over more than 55,000 square miles of West Texas and Southeast New Mexico, can be challenging for West Texas VA Health Care System. The health care system has introduced the Vital Signs podcast as an innovative approach to reaching employees in a non-traditional way.

Beginning with a series on Own the Moment, West Texas VA is using this private podcast series as an alternative to traditional training and communications channels, reaching its employees in a more meaningful and engaging way. With guest hosts and subject matter experts from across the nation, West Texas VA leaders spend about 20 minutes on each episode.

This summer, West Texas VA

published three episodes on Own the Moment and started on the next series, Service-to-Service, which highlights various services from across the health care system. These podcast episodes are part of a longer-range goal of improving the Veteran and employee experience, as well as improving communications across the organization.

Conducting research, recruiting guest speakers and managing the post-production of Vital Signs is a big lift for West Texas VA's two-person communications office, but by sticking to a monthly episodic format, with guidance and support from the Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs, they were able to work Vital Signs into their editorial calendar with little difficulty.

"We have a great team at West Texas VA Health Care System," said



West Texas VA Health Care System Director Jason Cave sits for an interview with Vital Signs Podcast.

Director Jason Cave. "However, when it comes to communicating with staff, there's always room for improvement—this is one tool we're employing to do just that."

West Texas VA is planning to expand Vital Signs from an internal communications channel to a public channel, reaching out to more than 33,000 Veterans to discuss topics such as community care, whole health, benefits and more. ♦

*Cole is the public affairs officer for the West Texas VA Health Care System.*

## Columbia VA's LEMONADE Pledge Celebrates Employees

By Marlous Black

**N**ational Lemonade Day on Aug. 20 was the perfect time for the Columbia VA Health Care System to formally celebrate the Living Every Moment Optimistically Nonstop and Defying Expectations (LEMONADE) pledge that each of their 2,900 employees made to make the system the best it can be for South Carolina Veterans and to celebrate winning a national competition in patient experience.

As employees arrived for work, leaders thanked them for their commitment to excellent customer service and distributed lemon-shaped cookies with attached wording that embodied the pledge program. Each employee made a pledge that was special to them and allowed them to focus on how they can make every day special for Veterans.

The Columbia VA was recently

recognized nationally as a leader in patient experience. The facility won VA's Patient Experience Award in Culture Innovation for their LEMONADE pledge program, designed to hardwire trust and commitment to Veterans in everything employees do, improving the patient experience.

The facility embraced the adage of "turning lemons into lemonade" by asking employees to make a pledge to bring about a more positive patient experience, deliver excellent customer service, and increase Veterans' trust in the health care system.

Employees were appreciative of the event, and of leaders taking the time to thank them for their dedication and commitment to enhancing Veterans' experiences every day.



Columbia VA's mascot, "Sunshine," greets employees arriving for work.

"To come in and be welcomed like this with all the lemonade items really boosts morale," said Angela Walker, administrative officer for primary care. "I do believe in the LEMONADE pledge, and my pledge is to be the change that I want to see in others."

The Columbia VA hopes other facilities will adopt this initiative to help bring about a more positive experience for their Veterans. ♦

*Black is a public affairs specialist with the Columbia VA Health Care System.*



# Veteran Parents Welcomed at Drive-Through Baby Shower

By Ryan Coverdell

For decades, folks have celebrated new life by gathering to play games, give presents and enjoy the company of family and friends. For many, a baby shower provides welcome relief as they adapt to their new role in life. Others find it a necessity to afford all the child's needs. Let's face it, diapers, wipes and formula are expensive over time.

For Veterans in the VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System, some much-needed relief came just in time. Back in July, the only thing brighter than the sun was the smile on each parent's face as they ventured through the drive-through Veterans baby shower.

Though this year's event had no games or prizes, it offered many mothers and fathers a touching reminder that they are not alone.

"They appreciated the thoughtfulness of VA and the community donors to create a safe celebration for them," said Frances Mahoney, women Veterans coordinator at VA Sierra Nevada. "One mom-to-be, who does not have family nearby, felt that the handmade baby blankets were especially heartfelt. She was in awe that someone had gone to the effort to make them, like family would do."

The facility parking lot was packed with cars, diapers, blankets and expectant parents. The annual Veterans baby shower brought smiles and tears to parents and volunteers alike. Their hard work and creative planning



VA Sierra Nevada

The annual Veterans baby shower at VA Sierra Nevada brought smiles and tears to parents and volunteers.

provided a safe and inventive way to proceed with this special, one-of-a-kind event.

This was the third annual baby shower that VA Sierra Nevada has put on for Veteran parents. By the end of the day, staff, volunteers and recipient families were near tears. Many families had loved ones in other states that could not travel. While they didn't have the baby shower they had imagined, they found warmth and kindness from their VA family. ♦

*Coverdell is a public affairs specialist with the VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System.*



## Help Veterans Quit Tobacco

As a VA employee, you play a key role in supporting the health of your patients. Let Veterans know that quitting tobacco is possible and that VA has proven strategies and tools to help.

Visit [MentalHealth.va.gov/quit-tobacco/](https://MentalHealth.va.gov/quit-tobacco/).

# TEDxVeteransAffairs: Now More Than Ever

By Adrian Wilairat



Nikkole Weiss is a social worker at the Shreveport VA Medical Center in Louisiana.  
Photo by VAVS



**A** social worker whose patients struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). An attorney whose 6-year-old daughter battled a rare cancer. A congressional relations officer who lost her husband to suicide. These and other brave VA employees told their deeply personal stories during Lunch with TEDx 2020, held Sept. 14-20.

TEDx 2020 is licensed by the renowned nonprofit TED (Technology, Entertainment and Design), which began hosting dynamic talks in 1984. TED now allows other organizations, such as VA, to organize their own lectures through approved TEDx talks. In 2018, the National Veterans Month Committee received a license to launch **TEDxVeteransAffairs**.

VA's **TEDxVeteransAffairs** Committee now spearheads the Department's effort, designed to inform and inspire employees. Each year, the committee carefully curates a lineup of gifted VA speakers, who discuss successes and challenges at work and in their personal lives. Talks are informative, motivational, sad, entertaining—and everything in between.

"TEDx is an avenue for VA to tell its own story to employees and to share all the great things we're doing," said VA Voluntary Service Deputy Director and **TEDxVeteransAffairs** Committee Chairperson Prince Taylor. "Speakers tell stories that resonate with everyone at VA."

### ***'Running Into the Fire'***

The 2020 event embodied the resilience of the speakers themselves. In previous years, TEDxVeteransAffairs participants lectured in front of a live audience at VA Central Office. When the coronavirus pandemic emerged, however, the committee realized it needed to support social distancing practices.

The program was restructured as a semi-virtual event; videos of all speakers were pre-recorded and broadcast twice a day during the week-long event, with a host livestreamed from headquarters. The change in plans led to the TEDxVeteransAffairs 2020 theme, "Now More Than Ever," which emphasized VA's commitment to Veterans during this particularly challenging year and the dedicated employees who serve them.

The 14 speakers reflected the wide range of positions that VA employees hold across the country, including doctors, nurses, social workers, lawyers, managers and executives. Speakers recounted personal stories that resonated emotionally, with lessons applicable to the entire VA workforce.

Some of the talks focused directly on the workplace.

Last year's winner of the Samuel J. Heyman Service to America Federal Employee of the Year award, Victoria Brahm, director of the VA Great Lakes Health Care System (VISN 12), offered insights on "running into the fire," or how to rectify difficult work situations. She concluded that "we're in this together and have to take accountability for our actions."

Others spoke about the power of interpersonal connections. Ca-Asia Lane, a congressional relations officer, spoke about the effect of her husband's suicide and the years it took to grieve and process this profound loss. "It's not just about forgiving your loved one and that decision they made," said Lane. "It's also about forgiving yourself."

Nikkole Weiss, a social worker at the Shreveport VA Medical Center in Louisiana, recounted her volunteer efforts at VA since she was 16 years old. She pursued her degree at the University of Southern California, the only social work school with a Veteran-focused program.

Her bond with the Veterans she serves enables her to help those with PTSD. "Through the power of human connection, we can change the trajectory of the world," said Weiss.



VISN 12 Director Victoria Brahm accepts the Samuel J. Heyman Service to America Federal Employee of the Year Award from VA Secretary Robert Wilkie in 2019.

## ***'Culture of Superheroism'***

Meghan Flanz, an attorney with the Real Property Law group in Los Angeles, spoke about the importance of generosity, sharing and listening. Flanz drew parallels between the anxiety that she and many others feel now and connected it to the anxiety she felt when her 6-year-old daughter was hospitalized for months while receiving treatment for leukemia. Flanz discussed the value of helping those in need, from loved ones to strangers, and the lasting positive effect that can have.

Lucy Houghton, a nurse at the White City VA Medical Center in Oregon, discussed the "culture of superheroism" that exists in health care and how caring for so many patients with debilitating illnesses results in burnout.

"I realized that every time I put on my scrubs and my clogs, I was putting armor around my heart and my mind," she said. Houghton was able to overcome mental fatigue by realizing that "joy is inextricably dependent on our ability to connect to other people."

Photo courtesy of Meghan Flanz



Meghan Flanz is an attorney with the Office of General Counsel.

## **Telling Our Stories**

To view the inspiring videos from **TEDxVeteransAffairs** 2020 and previous years, visit <https://dvagov.sharepoint.com/sites/vhatedxveteransaffairs>.

### **TEDxVeteransAffairs 2020 Speakers:**

- Pamela Powers, acting deputy secretary
- Victoria Brahm, VISN 12 network director
- Ca-Asia Lane, congressional relations officer, Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs
- Nikkole Weiss, social worker, Shreveport VA Medical Center
- Meghan Flanz, attorney, Office of General Counsel
- Chad Kessler, emergency medicine national program director, Durham VA Medical Center
- Daniel Sitterly, assistant secretary, Human Resources Administration & Operations Security & Preparedness
- Danielle Nam, volunteer, Palo Alto VA Medical Center
- Indira Subramanian, neurologist, West Los Angeles Campus
- Heather Seymour, social worker, Columbus VA Ambulatory Care Center
- Lucy Houghton, organizational development director, White City VA Medical Center
- Erin Bultje, public affairs officer, VISN 10
- Amy Parker, chief learning officer, Veterans Health Administration
- Dr. Richard Stone, executive in charge, Veterans Health Administration

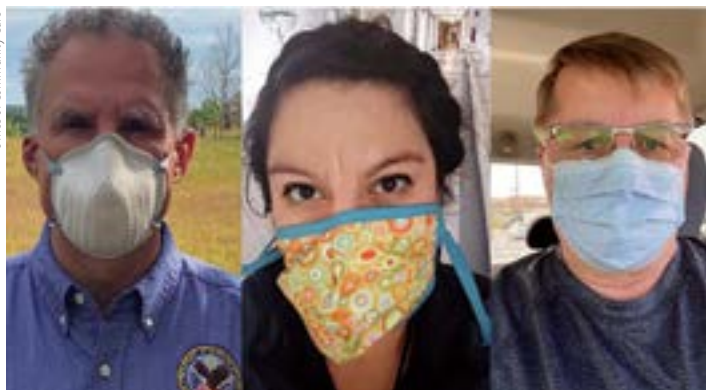


# VA Insider Roundup from Across the Department

By Jennifer Sardam

Employee platform [VA Insider](#) is the online companion to *Vanguard*. It hosts the day to day stories of the work VA does, the accomplishments of employees and “news to use” both at work and home. Here are a few recent highlights.

Office of Community Care



Office of Community Care employees Brady White, Susan Schavee and Randy Rothleutner (left to right) volunteered to serve on the pandemic front lines.

## Excelling During the Pandemic

One of the most viewed posts was “Employees volunteer to serve on pandemic front lines.” Even months after the COVID-19 pandemic had begun, blog coverage showed that despite the ongoing situation, VA employees continued to excel in their mission to serve Veterans.

When the call came to consider applying for a deployment with the Office of Emergency Management (OEM)’s Emergency Management Coordination Cell as part of the COVID-19 response, three Veterans Health Administration employees were quick to answer. Office of Community Care members Brady White, Susan Schavee and Randy Rothleutner soon found themselves engaged in a fast-paced, high-profile environment.

“Our team took on the role of figuring out the deployment of people, placing them where they [needed] to be as part of the COVID-19 effort,” said Schavee.

Douglas Etter



Nurse Practitioner Tracy Shenk and 98-year-old World War II Veteran Jack “Doug” Trumbore have formed a special bond.

While at OEM headquarters in Martinsburg, W.Va., both Rothleutner and White applied to and completed the Disaster Emergency Medical Personnel System program training and are now qualified for a future deployment. Both men continue to remark how this experience has been one of the more meaningful opportunities of their careers.

Nurse Manager Tracy Shenk, an adult geriatric nurse practitioner, is another example of someone who finds great significance in her role as a VA employee and demonstrates it through her actions. Working out of the Lebanon (Pa.) VA Medical Center to provide home-based primary care to Veterans with complex health care needs, Shenk has found an enduring friendship with Veteran Jack “Doug” Trumbore.

When it came time to celebrate his 98th birthday in the middle of a statewide lockdown, Shenk found a way. She invited the Veteran’s family, friends and neighbors to toast him from his driveway!

She also drove about 140 miles round trip to Philadelphia on her own time to pick up the birthday boy’s favorite—vanilla cake with cheesecake-mousse filling and vanilla icing.

“It was better than any chow the Army ever gave us,” said Trumbore.



Truman VA

Laura Jacobs, an audiologist at Truman VA, wears one of her grandmother’s masks while caring for a Veteran with profound hearing loss.

Even VA employees’ family members have gotten in on the act, making it their mission to support the Veterans’ experience as well.

Meredith Willcox, the 95-year-old grandmother of an audiologist working at Harry S. Truman Memorial Veterans’ Hospital in Columbia, Mo., learned that some Veterans had issues with comprehension because of COVID-19 masking policies.

Using the internet and her sewing skills, Willcox made specialized masks that incorporated a clear mouth covering to help Veterans with significant hearing loss,

## BEST OF THE BLOG

so they could visually read a speaker's lips and better understand conversations.

### Getting the Job

A guest blog post by Faith Elkins, a supervisory human resources specialist with the Veterans Benefits Administration, sparked the interest of many readers. Her post, "Getting the job: what is 'Specialized Experience?'" advised in actionable ways how a job applicant can accurately describe and provide examples of their specialized experience when applying for a federal job opportunity.

This post comprised the fourth chapter in the ongoing series "The Secrets of Human Resources," which seeks to uncover the mysteries of human resources topics such as pay, promotions and more.

Her advice on specialized experience? "Don't just copy the major duties from the announcement into your resume. It won't impress anyone, especially the hiring manager. Your resume may even be weeded out in the beginning.

"Answering job announcements isn't easy," Elkins added. "But if your answers make it easy for the reader to connect the dots from you to the experience they need, you'll make it to the next step of landing the job you want."

### Bonding With Horses

In "No judging. Just horses, camaraderie and peace," readers learned about Utah State University (USU)'s Pathway to Horsemanship, which a group of six VA Salt

Lake City Health Care System Veterans had recently completed, becoming the program's first class of Veterans to do so.

Judy Smith, director of Equine and Human Science at USU, began the program at the urging of her son, who was injured while deployed. With USU in need of a Veteran-focused program and a VA Adaptive Sports Grant, she found a perfect outlet.



Barton Jeffs, a retired Army National Guard warrant officer with 30 years of service, bonds with his horse, Rebel. He said working with horses has allowed him to live again.

After an initial meet and greet, each Veteran and horse are paired for six weeks, each week working toward strengthening their emotional bond. The program works because it gives Veterans a new, enjoyable activity in a safe environment that allows them to bond with other Veterans, according to Dr. William Marchand, clinic director and service chief for Whole Health at the Salt Lake City VA. ♦



If you or a Veteran you know is having thoughts of suicide, contact the Veterans Crisis Line 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. Call **1-800-273-8255** and **Press 1**, text to **838255**, or chat online at [VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat](https://VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat).

**VeteransCrisisLine.net**



Each year, the Veterans Day National Committee holds a contest to design a commemorative Veterans Day poster. The winning design is shared with VA facilities, military installations, and cities and towns across the country. It is the official image of the Veterans Day Observance at Arlington National Cemetery.

This year, the committee looked to a former infantryman to help everyone better understand the Veteran experience. What's more, Casey Brown is serving Veterans at the Veterans Benefits Administration's Fiduciary Hub in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Brown has lived the life he illustrates. He was a Marine Corps infantryman deployed to Iraq, where he saw a lot of combat. He returned, using his GI Bill and Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) benefits as an undergraduate in graphic arts.



His life circumstances changed, and he shifted gears a bit, achieving a master's degree in health administration. During Brown's graduate program, his VR&E counselor helped him set up a work study opportunity at the Salt Lake City Fiduciary Hub. That experience led him to his current position as an assistant coach.

"From there, a seed grew into a thought and the thought into an idea," said Brown. "When I get an idea in my head, I cannot rest until it comes out."

There was a vicious wind and sand storm last night,  
I lay awake for at least a couple hours.

I was thinking about the future  
and what kind of person I would be after all this  
or if I would even make it through any of it.

Just listening to the wind blow,  
listening for answers.

*John Warner, 4th graders*

We are now in  
there is a very  
a lot of the  
their faces as  
they just be  
light green and



WE WERE NOW ABOUT 12 MILES FROM BISHOP. THERE IS A VERY WELCOME FEELING COMING FROM THE PEOPLE I HAVE HERE. A LOT OF THE LITTLE KIDS RUN UP TO THE ROAD AND WAVE WITH SMILE ON THEIR FACES AS IF IT WERE A PARADE. IN SOME SMALL WAY, I BROUGHT THE JOY HOME.

© 1997 STEPHEN WILSON. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

[illegible]

"I wanted to express the beauty and rigidness of the camaraderie in military service. I would like others to see the life cycle of a Veteran," said Brown.

"We help others along the way, we ask for help from time to time. We turn back around and help those next in line. Then at the end, we get to look back and ask ourselves if we left this country better than we found it; if we chose others' lives over our own."

"I had some issues when I came back," he said. "VA saved my life several times. I really wanted to see if I could help others."

*Richardson is a senior writer and Heintz is a public affairs specialist with the Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs.*

# ***Streamlining Disability Claims***

*VA's Office of Information and Technology  
developed 'Smart Tool' to Aid Claims Processing  
and Enhance Customer Service*



**VA** [disability compensation](#) is a monthly tax-free payment to Veterans with disabilities that are the result of a disease or injury experienced while serving in the military and to Veterans whose service worsened an existing condition. Veterans gather supporting documents, [submit a claim](#), and then VA processes the claim.

To help make the processing of disability claims more efficient, Bennett Gebken, with the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) Office of Business Integration, partnered with the VA Office of Information and Technology (OIT) to develop an Artificial Intelligence (AI)-enabled tool that quickly classifies disabilities associated with disability compensation claims. The initial tool was open sourced and inspired multiple implementations as it allowed VBA to more efficiently prioritize and route those claims.

**“It’s one of the latest innovations driving VA’s mission to seamlessly deliver vital services to Veterans through digital transformation.”** – *Nelson Colon, Ph.D.*



The initial versions were launched in August 2019 but offered opportunities for further improvement and innovation. OIT regularly looks for ways to modernize and transform business processes to enhance customer service for Veterans and began work to improve the application programming interface (API) by centralizing these efforts.

OIT Communications



The tool aids the processing of disability compensation claims that Veterans file online.

This business need was met by Nelson Colon, Ph.D., a presidential innovation fellow detailed to the VBA project by the office of VA Chief Technology Officer Charles Worthington. Colon implemented a much-improved version, the Claims Attributes “Smart Tool,” which is an API that matches the disability provided by the Veteran when applying online with categories of disabilities VBA uses for workload management.

## Streamlining Functions

The tool’s value to Veterans stems from its ability to accelerate claims routing, helping ensure claims get to the right employee to work them as quickly as possible. In the spirit of continuous improvement, OIT remains committed to iterative improvements, with an enhanced version of the tool expected to be released in early 2021.

“It’s one of the latest innovations driving VA’s mission to seamlessly deliver vital services to Veterans through digital transformation,” said Colon.

The Claims Attributes API is the latest example of VA implementing automated programs equipped with AI or “machine-learning” capabilities to streamline functions that previously required thousands of hours of human effort.

Shortly after debuting, the Claims Attributes API—initially dubbed the “Content Classification Predictive Service”—showed promising results. During its early versions and testing periods, VBA saw the average timeline for establishing Veterans’ disability claims reduced by an average of three and a half days, according to Colon.

For claims that have gone through this process, VBA employees no longer need to manually review and match written disabilities to VBA’s categories of disabilities, which added time before the claim could be routed to the right location, said Colon.

With more than 100 separate categories of medical symptoms impacting classification of Veterans’ forms, as well as where they route for processing, the opportunities for misinterpretation were many. Now, the tool automatically translates Veterans’ word choices, like “ringing in the ears” or “trouble sleeping,” into the



VA Photo

The new “Smart Tool” accelerates routing of disability compensation claims filed by Veterans, helping ensure claims get to the right employee to work them as quickly as possible.

appropriate categorical language used by VA.

"We built what amounts to an automated medical dictionary look up for the system," said Colon. "Our program examines the text the Veteran has provided, then matches it to the most likely definition on the VA side."

#### **Making Improvements**

Throughout 2020, Colon and his team of technologists monitored the tool's performance and made additional updates. By late summer, they were encouraged by additional improved results in shortened claims establishment times, and in other key productivity categories, including a significant improvement in the number of claims automatically established over the previous year before the tool was deployed.

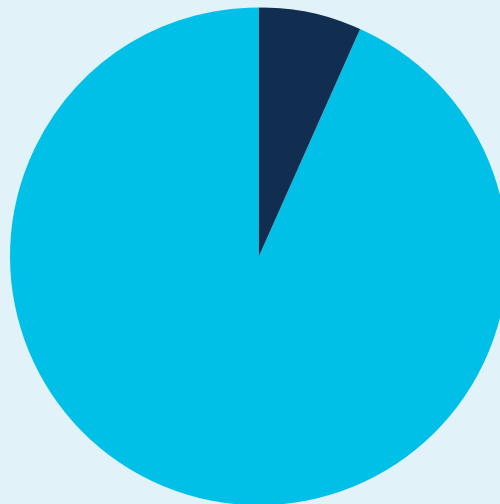
In June 2019, a mere 6.9 percent of submitted 21-526EZ forms had claims automatically established. But a year later, in June 2020, the rate of auto-established claims had increased to 40.5 percent, said Colon. Further, during the same timeframe, more than 400,000 packets—bundled forms including DD-214s and VA Form 21-526s that Veterans sometimes submit in total—have been automatically established, thanks to the Claims Attributes API and early prototypes.

This developing project and the Claims Attributes API underscore the power of IT transformation at VA, helping fulfill the mandate of VA Secretary Robert Wilkie and OIT Assistant Secretary for Information and Technology James P. Gfrerer to enable a seamless, unified Veteran experience.

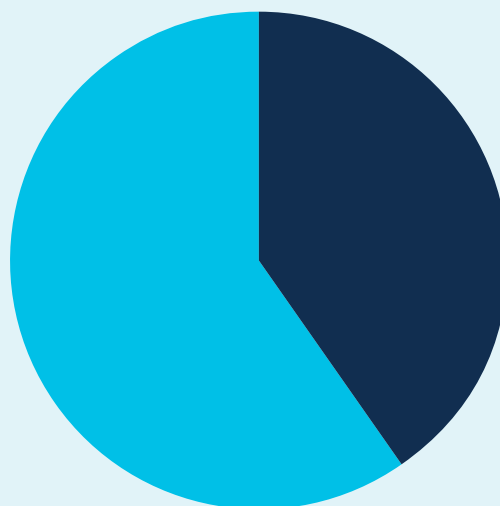
The number of claims that were automatically established improved significantly over the previous year before the tool was deployed.

Image by OIT Communications

## **Total Claims Established Without Manual Intervention**



**June 2019: 6.9%**



**June 2020: 40.5%**

# Recognizing the Contributions of Women Veterans

By Bruce Cummins

This portrait of May Alm, who served in the Army Nurse Corps during World War II, is part of the virtual photo exhibit on the Center for Women Veterans website.

Photo by Gene Russell

I AM NOT  
INVISIBLE



CAPTAIN MAY ALM  
UNITED STATES ARMY VETERAN 1942 - 1945  
NURSE CORPS - WWII VETERAN OMAHA BEACH



**M**ore than 90 Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System women Veterans, who are also VA employees, participated in a recent virtual photo exhibit recognizing their military service contributions.

The “I Am Not Invisible” exhibit was on display at the Biloxi VA Medical Center in Mississippi, and the Joint Ambulatory Care Center in Pensacola, Fla. Spearheaded by VA’s Center for Women Veterans, this national campaign is designed to increase awareness and dialogue about women Veterans as well as open viewers’ eyes to the contributions, needs and experiences of women who have served in the United States armed forces during all eras.

Gene Russell, photographer for the Secretary and official “I Am Not Invisible” campaign photographer, has traveled to more than 40 states to complete the three-year project.

### Changing Perceptions

The day-long photo shoots gave these women the opportunity to participate in an initiative that Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System Women Veterans Program Manager Donna Maxwell said is important to the changing perceptions of women who have served in the military.

“Women Veterans have served since the Revolutionary War,” said Maxwell. “Most people don’t realize there are two million women Veterans today. That number increases daily. Projects such as this highlight the fact that women are not only daughters, mothers, sisters, wives and girlfriends. They are Veterans who have made important contributions to this country, and we are not invisible.”

Participation in each photo shoot was staggered to observe physical distancing guidelines. Some women Veterans brought mementos, including uniform items, photos, and other military memorabilia for inclusion in their photos.

Event participant Yolonda Robert, an oncology-licensed practical nurse at the Pensacola Joint Ambulatory Care Center, said the project serves two purposes.

“I think it’s very important for women to be acknowledged for their service,” said Robert. “Projects such as this help highlight the role women Veterans have played throughout our history, and also bring to light the fact that VA has health care services for women.”

### Teaching America

Russell said that each photo included in the project features a brief biography of the Veteran and their thoughts on their service. It also brings attention to the importance of both the project and the changing perceptions of women Veterans.

**“I think we need to teach America how these women served their country and the various ways they served their country.”**

— Gene Russell

“We’ve photographed 2,600 women Veterans who have served America,” said Russell. “And one of the most amazing things about this project is that we take their information and put it on the poster. We share that through the Center for Women Veterans Facebook page. I think we need to teach America how these women served their country and the various ways they served their country.”

Russell added that completed photos of Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System women Veterans—as well as other “I Am Not Invisible” campaign participants—are available on the Center for Women Veterans website at [www.va.gov/womenvet/](http://www.va.gov/womenvet/).

The Center for Women Veterans, established by Congress in 1994, monitors and coordinates the administration of health care and benefits services and programs for women Veterans; serves as an advocate for a cultural transformation (both within VA and in the general public) in recognizing the service and contributions of women Veterans and women in the military; and raises awareness of the responsibility to treat women Veterans with dignity and respect.

The Biloxi VA Medical Center, along with the Mobile, Pensacola, Eglin and Panama City VA clinics, are all part of the Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System, which provides a variety of medical outpatient services to more than 70,000 Veterans. ♦

*Cummins is a public affairs specialist with the Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System.*



# Top Honors for Leaders of Two Health Care Programs

By Ndidi Mojay



SAMUEL J. HEYMAN

## SERVICE *to* AMERICA MEDALS

Top honors went to leaders of two VA programs who were named winners of the 2020 Samuel J. Heyman Service to America Medals (Sammies). Announced on Oct. 5, the recognition is for health care programs—Connected Care and 3D Printing Network—that have helped transform the lives of countless Veterans.

*“It’s inspiring to see VA employees apply their medical expertise to innovations that elevate the quality of care delivered to Veterans.”*

*— Robert Wilkie*



Neil Evans, M.D., Kathleen Frisbee, Ph.D., and Kevin Galpin, M.D. (left to right) lead VA's Connected Care program.

**N**eil Evans, M.D., Kathleen Frisbee, Ph.D., and Kevin Galpin, M.D., were the 2020 medal winners in the management excellence category. Their combined skills and leadership in technology, medicine and policy are guiding VA's merging of virtual tools with health care.

Beth Ripley, M.D., Ph.D., was the 2020 medal winner in the science and technology category. She led the creation of a network that started with 3D printers in Richmond, Va., Pittsburgh and Minneapolis in 2017 and has since grown to 35 medical centers across the country. While innovation and the federal government are rarely mentioned in the same breath, the Sammys offer a platform to elevate government innovation and noteworthy accomplishments impacting American lives.

"VA has long been a leader in incorporating innovative technologies to meet the health care needs of the nation's Veterans," said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. "It's inspiring to see VA employees apply their medical expertise to innovations that elevate the quality of care delivered to Veterans."

### Connected Care

As America's largest integrated health care system, VA has long invested in [Connected Care](#) services creating expansive resources via telehealth options, mobile apps and other digital health solutions. In fiscal year 2020, more than 1 million Veterans used VA telehealth services for more than 3 million appointments.

"Connected Care technologies allow Veterans to link with their VA health care teams from their preferred location," said Evans. "Ultimately, this makes care more accessible and convenient."

During normal operations before the coronavirus pandemic hit, an average of 2,000 Veterans a day used VA Video Connect to join virtual appointments from home. That number swelled to 18,000 a day in April due to COVID-19.

"As the crisis unfolded, VA relied on connected care technologies to provide ongoing medical care," said Frisbee. "This has helped to reduce the number of Veterans who are ill from physically entering medical facilities."

VA's health portal, MyHealtheVet, has more than 3 million authenticated patients who average 440,000 prescription refill requests and send about 280,000 secure messages each week. The department has surpassed 60 mobile health apps on its VA App Store, many of them developed by VA for Veterans and staff to improve the care delivered.

"We want this to be the most convenient health care system with consistent access for every Veteran no matter where they are," said Galpin. "Remote options available to Veterans have been critical, especially for those living in rural areas and those with mobility or transportation challenges."

### 3D Printing Network

VA established a national [3D Printing Network](#) using 3D printing technology to develop a variety of solutions and advancements that aid in surgery, prosthetics, dentistry and assistive technology devices tailored to individual patients' needs.

"This has been a significant investment in the future of VA," said Ripley. "Our mission is clear: the goal is to serve Veterans. All I have to worry about is how to treat patients."

In March, VA quickly mobilized its 3D printing resources to help with the fight against COVID-19. This resulted in partnerships with the Food and Drug Administration, National Institutes of Health and private industry to rapidly scale across the network and create prototypes for personal protective equipment and medical supplies—including face shields, masks and ventilators.



Beth Ripley, M.D., Ph.D., leads VA's 3D Printing Network.



VA partnered with other federal agencies and private industry to create prototypes for personal protective equipment to help in the fight against COVID-19.



Before the pandemic, Ripley set her sights on creating living tissue and exploring projects to print vascularized bone for treating patients with bone tumors or chronic infections. VA Puget Sound Health Care System, where Ripley works, is one of four hospitals with a bioprinter.

The Sammys, known as the “Oscars” of government service, were named for the Partnership for Public Service’s late founder, who believed “the future of our nation quite simply depends on the quality of our government.”

Evans, Frisbee, Galpin and Ripley were among 27

finalists announced in May and were chosen from more than 350 nominations submitted to the Partnership for Public Service. There were six medalists this year, who were chosen by a prestigious selection committee that included leaders from government, business, foundations, academia, entertainment and the media. Learn more about the Sammys and VA’s winners at <https://servicetoamericamedals.org/honorees/>. ♦

*Mojay is a public affairs specialist with the Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs.*



Partnership for Public Service

The leadership team for VA’s Connected Care program won the 2020 Management Excellence Medal.



Partnership for Public Service

Beth Ripley, M.D., Ph.D., won the 2020 Science and Environment Medal.

# Telehealth Program Expanding Access to Care for Veterans

By VA Voluntary Service

Operating the nation's largest health care system, VA uses a wide variety of technologies to ensure excellence in care delivery. New technologies are revolutionizing care, and VA is recognized as a world leader in the development and use of telehealth.

VA's capacity to leverage this innovative and high-quality service has been a critical staple of care during the response to COVID-19. Designed to ensure access to services when patients and practitioners are geographically separated, few could have imagined telehealth being used at its present-day levels as the result of a global pandemic.

In 2019, more than 900,000 Veterans received care through VA telehealth. Any Veteran who qualifies to receive VA health care and lives in one of the 50 states or a United States territory is eligible to use VA telehealth.

**"While they requested a telehealth appointment, I heard stories of Veterans who didn't know how to use the system and had to reschedule their appointments for in-person visits."**

— Sabrina Clark

Since early March 2020, telehealth use has increased sevenfold, with more than 18,000 Veterans system-wide using VA Video Connect for services. As VA's COVID-19 response continues, more providers are delivering virtual health care, including more than 75 percent of primary care and mental health providers.

While this alone is extraordinary, VA has tapped an even more vital



Navy Veteran Jim Doray and his wife Paulina meet virtually with providers from the comfort of their home.

resource to assist in helping Veterans access care through VA Video Connect—volunteers. VA Voluntary Service (VAVS) boasts the support of more than 61,000 volunteers who serve more than 9 million hours each year.

When the pandemic hit, those numbers were severely reduced due to the suspension of most volunteers working in VA health care facilities and those working directly with hospitalized Veterans. For the safety of employees, patients and the volunteers themselves, VAVS worked with facility leaders to determine where volunteers were most critically needed and how they could most efficiently be used.

As reports continued to highlight the growing use of telehealth, Sabrina C. Clark, Ph.D., director of VA Voluntary Service, considered the potential for volunteers to help facilitate access to care using VA Video Connect. "As I continued to see more and more news reports about the expanded use of telehealth, I was also hearing about the challenges that some Veterans were having accessing the system," she said.

"While they requested a telehealth appointment, I heard stories of Veterans who didn't know how to use the system and had to reschedule their appointments for in-person visits. I just wondered whether

volunteers could add any value in a situation like that."

Clark reached out to Kevin Galpin, M.D., executive director of VA Telehealth Services, with a simple question: "How can we help?" He quickly had an answer that involved volunteers teaching Veterans how to use VA Video Connect, minimizing the potential for scenarios like those Clark described from occurring in the future.

This program would come to represent only the beginning of the development of virtual volunteer assignments and the ushering in of a new era in community volunteer involvement in VA health care.

Within a few days, Galpin had assembled an enthusiastic group of about a dozen employees from VA's national telehealth office and VAVS formed a "Tiger Team" to begin developing a plan for pulling together VA's very own "Geek Squad." The first meeting included a small group of college students who are now part of the Design Team and represent the target group of volunteers for the initial launch of the program.

Now with an official name, the Telehealth Veterans Education & Training (T-VET) Program is pulling together all the pieces of this plan and preparing to begin serving Veterans this fall. ♦

# A Most Sacred Mission

By NCA Office of Engagement and Memorial Innovations

**Planning a memorial service for a loved one can be overwhelming, but help is available for Veterans and their families.**



**P**lanning a memorial service for a loved one can be overwhelming. Whether it is planned after death occurs (time-of-need) or beforehand (pre-need), arranging a funeral or memorial service is often an exhausting and highly personal process. Fortunately, VA provides several burial options and memorial benefits to ensure every eligible Veteran and family member receives a burial of dignity, honor and respect.

### Pre-Need Eligibility

Veterans and family members no longer need to wait until the time of death to find out if they are eligible for burial in a national cemetery. They can have their eligibility determined in advance, using VA's Pre-Need application. Applicants can learn more and download the necessary form at [www.va.gov/burials-memorials/pre-need-eligibility/](http://www.va.gov/burials-memorials/pre-need-eligibility/).

The National Cemetery Administration (NCA) notifies each applicant when their application is received and communicates with them about expected timelines for making the determination. To fill out the Pre-Need application, applicants need to know the Veteran's social security number, date and place of birth, military status and service history, such as service dates, discharge character and rank—information commonly found on the DD-214 or other separation documents.

If you don't have discharge papers, you can find out how to request the DD-214 at [www.va.gov/records/get-military-service-records/](http://www.va.gov/records/get-military-service-records/).

VA Photo



Veterans and family members can now have their eligibility for burial in a national cemetery determined in advance.

### Time-of-Need Eligibility

Of course, many families don't decide where they want a loved one to be buried until after death has occurred. NCA's National Cemetery Scheduling Office can be reached on any day of the year except Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Day to schedule an interment.

Just as with Pre-Need, the most important documents needed to determine eligibility for interment are a Veteran's discharge papers, usually a DD-214. If families have the paperwork available, eligibility can quickly be established, and burials can often be scheduled at a nearby national cemetery within two or three days.

### Burial and Memorial Benefits

Burial benefits available to Veterans and eligible family members include a gravesite in any of our [153 national cemeteries](#) with available space, opening and closing of the grave, perpetual care, a government headstone or marker, a burial flag, and a Presidential Memorial Certificate, at no cost to the family. Some Veterans may also be eligible for [burial allowances](#). Cremated remains are buried or inurned in national cemeteries in the same manner and with the same honors as casketed remains.

Benefits available for spouses and dependents buried in a national cemetery include burial with the Veteran, perpetual care, and the spouse's or dependent's name and date of birth and death inscribed on the Veteran's headstone, at no cost to the family. Eligible spouses and dependents may be buried even if they predecease the Veteran.

### Headstones, Markers and Medallions

VA furnishes upon request, at no charge to the applicant, a government headstone or marker for the unmarked grave of any deceased eligible Veteran in any cemetery around the world, regardless of their date of death. A government-furnished headstone or marker may also be provided for eligible Veterans who died on or after Nov. 1, 1990, and whose grave is marked with a privately purchased headstone.

A government-furnished bronze medallion with the word "Veteran" and the appropriate branch of service may be provided for eligible Veterans who served on or after April 6, 1917, and whose grave is marked with a privately purchased headstone or marker. Flat markers in granite, marble and bronze and upright headstones in granite and marble are available. Bronze niche markers are also available to mark columbaria used for inurnment of cremated remains.

### Dignified Burials

Whether burial or memorialization is in a national cemetery, state Veterans' cemetery, military post/base cemetery, or private cemetery, NCA regards its mission "to provide dignified burials" for Veterans as one of the most sacred in all of federal government.

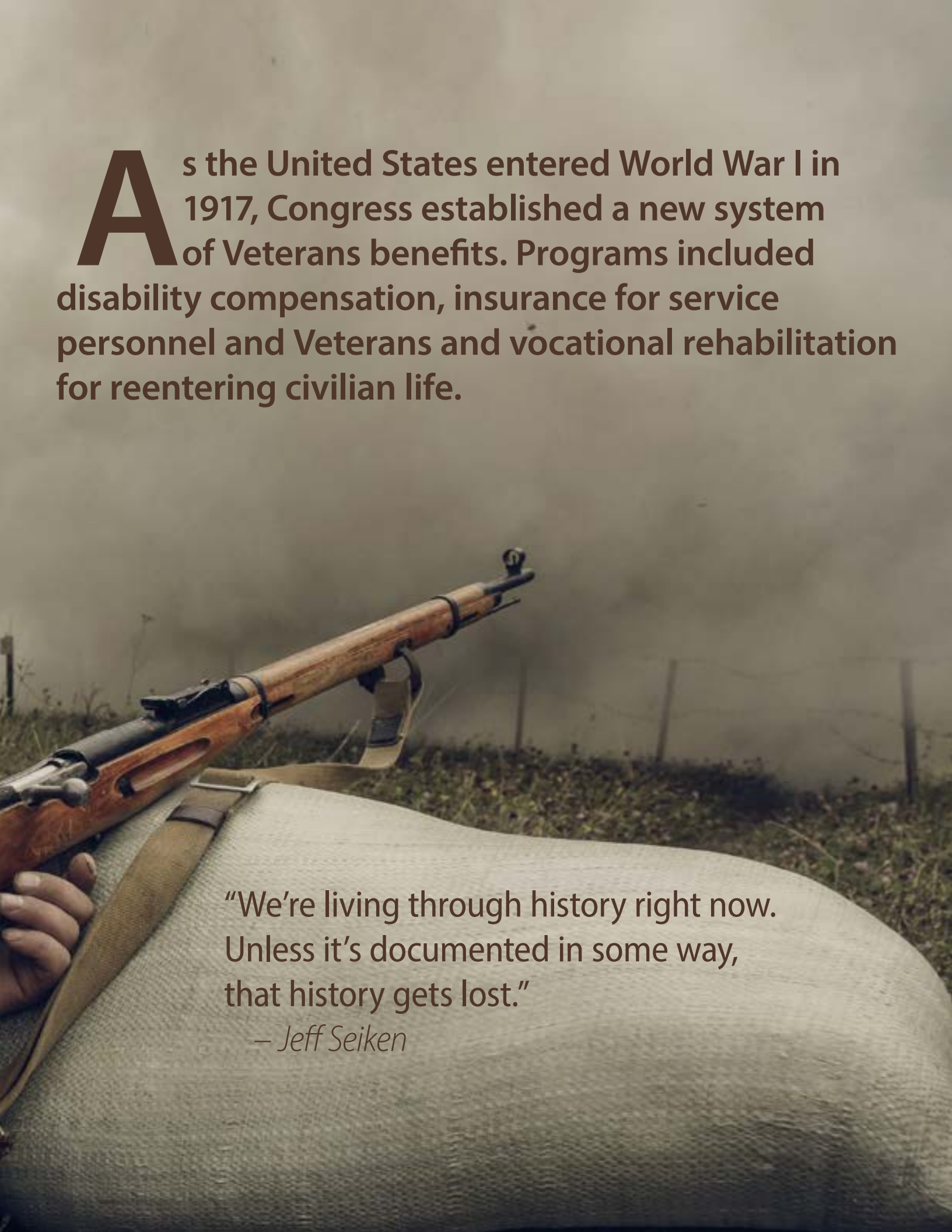
To assist Veterans and their families with burial planning and information, VA has created two valuable resources: the [VA Welcome Kit \(www.va.gov/welcome-kit/\)](#); and Planning Your Legacy: VA Survivors and Burial Benefits Kit ([www.cem.va.gov/cem/docs/factsheets/Planning\\_Legacy\\_Booklet.pdf](http://www.cem.va.gov/cem/docs/factsheets/Planning_Legacy_Booklet.pdf)). ♦

# A New Chapter in VA History

Veterans Benefits Administration  
gets its first historian

By Ann Richardson





**A**s the United States entered World War I in 1917, Congress established a new system of Veterans benefits. Programs included disability compensation, insurance for service personnel and Veterans and vocational rehabilitation for reentering civilian life.

“We’re living through history right now. Unless it’s documented in some way, that history gets lost.”

— Jeff Seiken



Imagine walking into a job where you were responsible for documenting that history and capturing the “we’ve never experienced this before” moments we are living through right now. On top of that, start during a pandemic when you can’t even physically go to your new job. That’s how new Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) historian Jeff Seiken began his VA experience.

While most other federal agencies have long had history offices, VA first established its History Office in 2019. Although there were historians with the National Cemetery Administration and Veterans Health Administration, there was no overarching VA History Office and no VBA historian. A year after establishing the History Office, VA found someone willing to take on a position that spans more than 100 years and is making historical moves right now.

Family Photo



**Jeff Seiken brings an extensive background in military history to his new role.**

A U.S. Army Soldier with Alpha Company, 1st Battalion, 19th Special Forces Group parachutes past Mt. Rainier on Joint Base Lewis-McChord on May 5, 2019.  
U.S. National Guard photo by Joseph Siemandel



Seiken has an extensive background in military history. Graduating from The Ohio State University with a doctorate in military, early American and world history, he went on to become an historian with the Air Force.

In 2010, he deployed with the largest combat wing in Afghanistan to record the history being made there. Embedding with the wing gave him a close-up view of military operations. The experience made a lasting impression, deepening his interest in the military and Veterans.

"I spent 15 years working with people in uniform," said Seiken. "I can kind of relate to their experiences a bit, and can translate that to VA. That said, the world of VA is completely new to me and I've had to immerse myself in trying to learn how benefits function today and understand the history of

Veterans benefits, going back to the American Revolution."

### **Where to Start?**

What's made it trickier is starting remotely in a pandemic. He's done virtual office calls with people in leadership positions, but it's not quite the same as having a conversation and getting to know people more informally. "There's no running into people in the hallway to follow up on things," he said.

Since he's the first person in the position, he also needs to formulate a plan for capturing the past, documenting the present and planning the future. So where will he start? He wants to collect and preserve the institutional history of VBA and the agencies that preceded it. "Our first Veterans benefits system started when the Continental Congress issued a promise of half pay to soldiers and officers disabled during the

American Revolution in 1776," said Seiken.

He wants to develop products and programs conveying that history both internally to employees and externally to Veterans, their families and the public at large. "The goal is to promote a better understanding of VBA and a broader story of how the nation has rewarded Veterans for their service from its earliest days to the present," he said.

One of the stories VBA would like to tell is how they streamlined the disability claims process to work through a claims backlog. VBA had more than 600,000 claims pending 10 years ago. After years of revamping the way they handle claims and digitizing the process, so they didn't have to rely on shuffling paper across offices, pending claims were down to 100,000 right before the pandemic.



The Manila Regional Office has records from the Japanese occupation of the Philippines during World War II.

Seiken explained it's the historian's job to understand how the problem was dealt with and the steps taken to preserve what was done. "[Then] when people move on or retire you don't lose the institutional knowledge."

### **Making History Right Now**

He's also recording VBA's response to the coronavirus pandemic. "Five years down the line when some other crisis happens," he said, "we can [show] all the adjustments and adaptations we made to continue providing services."

While it may seem like documenting VBA history would be a collection of memos and meeting minutes, Seiken has already heard about some

interesting artifacts at VBA regional offices.

"The Manila office has a roomful of records the Japanese turned over to the Americans at the end of World War II that's a treasure trove of fascinating historical records," he said. "There are cancelled checks, journals and other things from the occupation period" in the Philippines.

Another office believes it has an original rating schedule book, used by rating specialists to decide disability claims. Seiken hasn't seen the book yet, but an original would likely date back to the 1920s.

He's hoping to reach out soon to all VBA offices to see what else might be out there to incorporate into VA's permanent collection.

Seiken wants all employees to be able to contribute to the story of VA and hopes to establish a portal where employees can submit their recollections of doing their jobs during a pandemic.

For now, he believes it's important for employees to journal what they're doing differently, how they've adapted, what they are feeling. "We're living through history right now," said Seiken. "Unless it's documented in some way, that history gets lost."

No matter who you are, your memories are important. History doesn't only belong to the leaders at the top. It's the sum of all of us. By recording your experience, you can help the next generations learn from what you lived. ♦

Smithsonian Institution Archives



Bureau of War Risk Insurance employees working in their temporary offices at what is now the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History in 1918.



# Dispensing Advice and Hope to Job Seekers

By VA Careers

It started as an idea to raise awareness about the VA Careers program and “humanize” VA. Five months in, the “Talk About It Tuesday” broadcast series has taken on a life of its own as it continues to grow more popular with every episode.

The format is simple. Every Tuesday at noon (Eastern time), viewers join the LinkedIn Live broadcast through the VA Careers LinkedIn page. The broadcast moderator, Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Marketing Specialist Mike Owens, spends about 15 minutes addressing an issue related to careers at VA. Topics have included how to create an eye-catching cover letter, how the VA hiring process works, and how to use the VA Careers website to find and apply for jobs.

Throughout the broadcast, viewers can use the comment box at the bottom of their screen to submit questions and comments. VA staff volunteer to respond to questions in real time. Owens and fellow staff members also review and respond to viewer questions throughout the day and week.

Once a broadcast ends, the VA Careers team posts a video of the episode on the VA LinkedIn page. Since the series kickoff on June 9, videos have averaged more than 12,000 views and 900 comments per broadcast. Between June 9 and Sept. 10, 12 broadcasts attracted 144,171 views, 6,774 likes and 10,905 comments.

**“If each week I help at least one person understand something about applying to VA that they didn’t know before, then I feel like I’ve done my job.”**

— Mike Owens

## Words of Encouragement

On the last Tuesday of each month, Owens interviews a special guest, usually from within VHA, who selects the broadcast topic. These episodes typically attract the highest number of viewers.

Past discussion topics have included health care recruitment, life at VA and working for VA as a service-connected Veteran. Guests have included David Perry, acting chief officer of VHA’s Workforce Management and Consulting (WMC) Office, and Crystal Cruz, VHA’s executive director of Human Capital Management.

Owens usually selects the topics for the rest of the broadcasts, with viewer questions and comments often sparking ideas for future discussions. A Veteran and VA employee for the past four years, Owens dispenses words of encouragement to job seekers along with career advice.

“Don’t give up,” he counseled in one broadcast. “I applied 27 times before getting hired at VA. Who knows what your magic number will be? Stick with it and eventually it will come up.”

The broadcast series is aimed at Veterans and health care providers—two audiences that are targets of VA recruitment efforts. VA has thousands of vacancies in mission-critical health care positions at facilities across the country, especially for nurses, physicians, mental health professionals, pharmacists and senior health executives. Veterans make up one-third of VA’s 400,000-member workforce.

Giving people hope that one day they can also have a career with VA keeps Owens excited about each broadcast. “If each week I help at least one person understand something about applying to VA that they didn’t know before, then I feel like I’ve done my job,” he said.

The VA Careers program, within WMC, helps recruit and encourage highly qualified candidates to apply for these vacancies by raising awareness of VA as an employer of choice and driving potential candidates to the VA Careers website to search and apply for positions. VA Careers supports recruiter efforts with paid and unpaid advertising, career fairs, social media, blogs, video production, internal and external websites and national campaign initiatives.

The LinkedIn Live broadcast series evolved from VA’s relationship with LinkedIn. “LinkedIn has been a great friend to Veterans: for instance, it provides one year of free job-seeker service to all Veterans and military spouses,” said Darren Sherrard, VHA’s associate director for recruitment marketing.

“When we were offered access to LinkedIn Live, we wanted to use it to help Veterans learn more about positions at VA and offer career advice. It is also a good way to connect current employees with job seekers as mentors—or to offer encouragement.”

Anyone interested in learning more about careers at VA or picking up some useful career advice can tune in every Tuesday at noon (Eastern time). In addition, our website is a one-stop shop for everything VA careers-related and lets users search and apply for open positions by location or career specialty. To contact VA Careers, send an email to [VHARecruitmentMarketing@va.gov](mailto:VHARecruitmentMarketing@va.gov). ♦

# 100th Anniversary of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier: An Idea Takes Shape

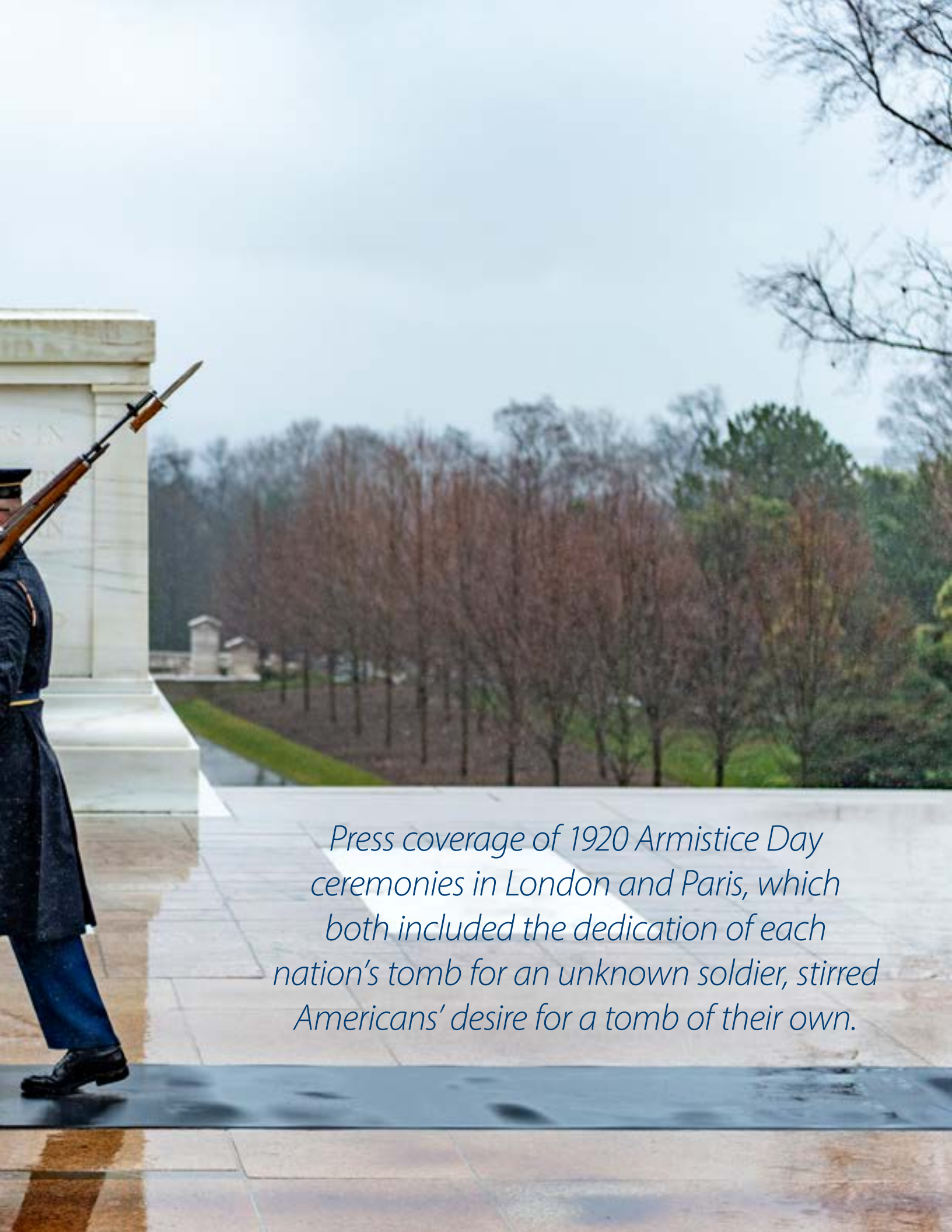
By Kevin M. Hymel



A sentinel walks the mat in front of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier during a rainy day at Arlington National Cemetery, Arlington, Virginia.

U.S. Army photo by Elizabeth Fraser / Arlington National Cemetery





*Press coverage of 1920 Armistice Day ceremonies in London and Paris, which both included the dedication of each nation's tomb for an unknown soldier, stirred Americans' desire for a tomb of their own.*



Soon after the guns along the Western Front fell silent on Nov. 11, 1918, signaling the end of combat in World War I, American service members, families and politicians began considering how best to honor the war dead and help Americans cope with their grief. Citizens flooded newspapers and the War Department with ideas, from monuments to memorial trees.

### Allied Inspiration

While the general public contemplated how to honor the fallen, Brig. Gen. William D. Connor, a Veteran of the war's Chateau-Thierry campaign, found inspiration in Paris, where the French planned to entomb an unknown soldier under the Arc de Triomphe to represent all those from France lost in the war.

The British planned to do the same in Westminster Abbey. "In Britain, it was called the tomb of the Unknown Warrior," explained Dr. Allison Finkelstein, senior historian at Arlington National Cemetery. Connor proposed the idea for an American unknown soldier's tomb to Army Chief of Staff Peyton March in early 1919, but March refused.

Press coverage of 1920 Armistice Day ceremonies in London and Paris, which both included the dedication of each nation's tomb for an unknown soldier, stirred Americans' desire for a tomb of their own. People wrote letters that demanded a tomb for an unknown soldier, while editorialists decried the government's lack of foresight.

The editors of the *Chicago Tribune* accused Secretary of War Newton Baker of having "not a one-track but a closed mind" and exclaimed, "What a piece of unutterable stupidity for Secretary Baker to oppose similar honors on this side to our own unknown dead no less worthy than those of Great Britain and France."



Army Gen. Peyton C. March initially turned down the idea of a Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

### Legislation for a Tomb

Responding to the American outcry, Rep. Hamilton Fish III (R-N.Y.) introduced a resolution in Congress on Dec. 21, 1920, to return one American unknown soldier from Europe for burial in Arlington National Cemetery. Fish served as an officer during the war with the 369th Infantry Regiment, a segregated African American unit known as the "Harlem Hellfighters."

Fish combined his resolution with another from Sen. Boies Penrose (R-Pa.). According to Finkelstein, Fish "wanted to use his new power as a representative to do something to honor living and dead Veterans of the First World War." The joint resolution received immediate support from important Veteran and family organizations.

On March 4, 1921, Congress passed the joint resolution, which called for the body of an unknown American soldier to be brought from France to the United States, "for burial in the Memorial Amphitheater of the National Cemetery at Arlington, Virginia."





United States citizens and newspaper editorialists criticized Secretary of War Newton Baker for not foreseeing the need for an American Tomb of the Unknown Soldier after World War I.

## Representing All Americans

Different groups looked forward to the burial of the single unknown American to represent all who had fought in World War II. The *Associated Negro Press* listed numerous possibilities and contemplated that “The ‘Unknown Soldier’ may be more, he may be ‘colored,’ but withal, and best, he is American.”

In the *American Israelite*, Jonah B. Wise broke down the American Army by race—12 percent Italian, 5 percent Jewish, 10 percent black, and 20 percent Irish—before explaining that the Unknown Soldier “may have been one of a hundred races” and argued that immigration made the Army stronger and more efficient “in the most cruelly exacting test—that of war.”

## From Memorial Day to Armistice Day

As the interment date drew near, the new secretary of war, John W. Weeks, moved it from Memorial Day to Armistice Day (today’s Veterans Day). He explained that rushing the process might result in selecting a soldier’s body that could later be identified.

With the decision made to inter an unidentified soldier, the Army would now have to choose one soldier from the American cemeteries in Europe to represent all the unknowns and return him to the United States.

## Next Issue: Selecting a Single Unknown American for the Nation

*Hymel is a contractor with Arlington National Cemetery.*



Staff Sgt. Ruth Hanks, Sentinel, 4th Battalion, 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard) places a rose at each of the four crypts of the Unknowns during her last walk ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Arlington National Cemetery, Va



Rep. Hamilton Fish III, World War I Veteran and sponsor of the resolution to create a Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in the United States.

# Tech Tools for Tough Times

By Adrian Wilairat

As thousands of non-clinical VA employees telework during the coronavirus pandemic, the Office of Information and Technology (OIT) has made available new tools to facilitate collaboration. These programs make it easy for employees to stay in touch with colleagues through video conferencing, web chat, document sharing and other modern methods of communication. Here's an overview of these programs and their best uses.

PolaroMagne/Unsplash



Collaboration tools provided by OIT enable employees to work effectively from home.

## Teams

Microsoft's replacement for Skype is available to anyone at VA with an Outlook email account. When you log on to the VA network, you are automatically logged on to Teams. Use this program to conduct video conferences, create groups for recurring meetings and share documents.

As a Microsoft product, Teams is connected to Outlook and SharePoint, which makes it easy to link items to calendar invitations and save documents in personal or shared folders. Teams works well for recurring meetings, since chats stay saved in the electronic meeting room.

Teams limits the number of meeting participants to 250 online, plus 150 more on the phone, so consider using a different tool if more might join. Teams at VA is restricted to the network; if people outside the department need access, consider a different platform.

*Great for:* recurring meetings and projects; sharing documents; medium-sized video conferences.

Learn more at <https://vawww.oit.va.gov/o365/microsoft-teams/>.

Elizabeth Murphy



Smart phones make it easy to connect with colleagues.

## Webex

VA had been piloting Cisco Webex early in 2020, but as the pandemic unfolded, OIT made Webex fully available. This web and video conferencing platform is more streamlined than Teams and is great for hosting meetings.

Webex is ideal for large webinars, as it allows up to 1,000 participants, including those outside the VA network. Webex also allows you to create a personal room for customizing and hosting recurring meetings, large or small. As a host, you can determine whether other webinar participants can see and interact with each other.

*Great for:* recurring meetings; large video conferences; collaborating with people outside VA.

Learn more at <https://dvagov.sharepoint.com/sites/OITUCIS/webex/SitePages/WebEx.aspx>.

## Zoom

This popular video conferencing platform enables participants to share their screens, send group or private messages and break into smaller groups. It also allows users to annotate screens through electronic white boards. Zoom's simple layout makes it easy to use, and unlike Webex, does not require a login or password to join meetings. Zoom is ideal for regular meetings where the focus is seeing and hearing participants.

*Great for:* recurring video conferences; breakout groups; meeting with people outside VA on a government network.

Learn more at <https://www.oit.va.gov/Services/TRM/ToolPage.aspx?tid=11645>.

To further facilitate collaboration, OIT has temporarily waived the restriction on non-public facing applications, such as Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp, Apple Facetime and Google Hangouts. (Public facing apps—those that do not require a password, such as Facebook Live and TikTok—remain prohibited.) Download and use permitted apps on your smart phone to connect and collaborate with colleagues.

These platforms ensure that remote workers can still interact with colleagues to complete assignments, stay connected and serve Veterans. Take advantage of these tools today! ♦

**Be aware that none of the programs mentioned in this article can be used to share patient information, Personally Identifiable Information or Protected Health Information.**

For more information, including training, contact OIT at <https://yourit.va.gov/va> or 855-673-4357.



# Make it your mission to care for Veterans.

As the developer of landmark medical innovations such as the nicotine patch and implantable pacemaker, VA has a proven record of helping health care professionals become trailblazers. And with over 1,200 locations in all 50 states, VA has career opportunities wherever life takes you. Join VA and see why Forbes ranks it as one of America's best employers. **Learn more: [choose.va.gov/careers](https://choose.va.gov/careers)**



See where VA can take your career.



**Choose  VA**  
[choose.va.gov/careers](https://choose.va.gov/careers)



# VeteransCrisisLine.net



If you know a Veteran is having thoughts of suicide, contact the Veterans Crisis Line 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. Call **1-800-273-8255** and **Press 1**, text to **838255**, or chat online at [VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat](https://www.VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat).